Nothing but the Truth, Take Two: Fighting for the Reader in the Tlatelolco 1968 Discourse

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At 6:10 p.m. on 2 October 1968, two firework rockets were shot from La Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City, where a student demonstration was taking place. Then army battalions, SWAT teams and police entered the square in tanks and on foot and opened fire on the demonstrators, journalists and the neighbourhood residents who were in the square.

Considering the existence of many accounts of the shooting, it is inconceivable that the government would try to deny the obvious violation of human rights. Nonetheless, the government officials laid blame on the students and their parents: 'El jefe de la policía capitalina, general Luis Cueto Ramírez, señaló ayer que en su parte, los padres de familia son los culpables de las recientes tragedias, porque no han sabido aconsejar o encauzar debidamente a sus hijos' (*El Excelsior*, October 4, 1968). The newspapers reported 20 dead and 75 wounded; however, a much higher figure of 325 dead (quoted in *The Guardian*) is accepted as the closest to the truth.

The Tlatelolco massacre has been the subject of many studies aiming to discover the 'truth'. But what is the 'truth' sought here? Is it objective truth about the event? Since there are as many 'truths' about the shooting as there are accounts of it, this study hypothesizes that both state and popular discourses of the Tlatelolco massacre aim to preserve the symbolic value of the event within collective memory rather than create a single accurate account of the shooting.

I hypothesise that there are two mechanisms of narrating a historical event: one is hegemonic (dominated by state discourses and, potentially, academic studies of the shooting), and the other is posthegemonic (dominated by literary and popular discourses). Neither mechanism produces or even aims to produce an accurate representation of the event; instead, the two systems control cognitive and affective domains in collective conscience.

I will compare the way the two mechanisms are used in contemporary analyses of the Tlatelolco massacre. The works in question are Roberto Blanco Moheno, *Tlatelolco:*

historia de una infamia (1969), and Gilberto Balam, *Tlatelolco: Reflexiones de un testigo* (1969). I aim to determine whether the two authors, apparently representing the opposing camps in the Tlatelolco discourse, approach the representation of the massacre from two divergent perspectives or whether their texts are characterised by the unity of the multiple mechanisms involved in creating a memory of the event in the collective conscience. For the purpose of this presentation, I will focus on one mechanism – the way the two authors work to convince the reader that their texts are telling the truth about the massacre. The unity of the affective foundation of the narrative and the search for the single 'truth' will form the basis of the analysis. I will address three elements comprising the unity:

1. The notion that the author is 'just like everyone else', which makes his experiences common and transferrable, and the reader can identify with the narrative. This is the first step in creating a unity between the author and the reader, initiated by the author and apparently willingly accepted by the reader.;
2. The recurring affirmations that the author's words are 'the truth', and the overall notion that the narrative seeks 'the truth' and delivers it;
3. An apparent shift of the locus of authority from the author to the reader.

The theoretical foundation of the project includes the theory of posthegemony in the context of Latin American cultural studies; here, I am particularly interested in the complementary co-existence of the cognitive and affective perception of history.

The concept of hegemony has been the subject of numerous sociological and cultural studies which focus on power relationships in modernity juxtaposing hegemony and subalternity (see Martín-Barbero 1993, Larsen 1995, and Moreiras 2001). The main principle of hegemony is consent-based power with force being 'employed only secondary' (Beasley-Murray 2010: 1). Wilful compliance on behalf of the public suggests a degree of discipline, which in turn indicates the cognitive nature of hegemony. However, it has been noted by most analysts that hegemony no longer functions as a single, all-pervading and successful power mechanism. Rather than reverting to the hegemony/counterhegemony juxtaposition, current studies on power and control in Latin America suggest an extension of hegemony beyond the usual ideological infrastructure. In his examination of the nature of political power in Latin America, Beasley-Murray introduces the term 'posthegemony', which he perceives as located primarily in the

affective domain. He concludes that posthegemony is 'the shift from a rhetoric of persuasion to a regime in which what counts are the effects produced and orchestrated by affective investment in the social, if by affect we mean the order of bodies rather than the order of signification' (Beasley-Murray 2003: 120). Posthegemony also implies multiple loci of control. In reference to multiple representations of a single historical event, this translates into a multitude of texts telling 'the truth' about the event. It also suggests that each text will be purporting – or indeed professing – to tell '**the** truth', thus implicitly denying the existence of a single fully truthful narrative. This is particularly interesting when we compare various accounts of the Tlatelolco massacre only to find ourselves trawling through so many inconsistencies and contradictions.

In the absence of a single 'truthful' account of the shooting in the state/official discourse and the overall public distrust of all narratives state- and government-related, the role of literary discourse of the Tlatelolco massacre may be twofold. On the one hand, it aims to fill in the 'truth' gap by preserving an accurate account of the event in collective memory; on the other, it consoles the public by offering it a definite – or even finite - version of the event. Nothing is left to add; this is what happened, and the public regains control over the chaos of the unknown.

There is another aspect to the truthfulness of a narrative of a historical event. Official historical discourse is the representation of hegemonic power distribution, based upon the ownership of knowledge, which is as 'objective' as it can be, with little or no emotions involved. The absence of emotions constitutes discipline, which should be the sign of the ability to process and retain objective knowledge. Popular discourse tends to be affectively charged; the level of emotional involvement determines the degree of 'truth' of the knowledge of the shooting held by the populace. This indicates that popular discourse of the Tlatelolco massacre is posthegemonic. In other words, emotions are the basis of the posthegemonic distribution of power. The absence of emotions (from the posthegemonic perspective) defines the absence of objective truth. Since emotions are subjective and circumstantial, so the 'truth' based upon them is also subjective. Does that mean that popular discourse represents historical 'truth' just as inaccurately as the official discourse (*a priori* corrupt because of the corrupt politics behind it)? If so, neither

hegemony nor posthegemony hold monopoly on objective historical knowledge or have complete control over the accuracy of the representation of a historical event.

The two essays analysed in this presentation are representative of the principal trend in the Tlatelolco discourse – the conflict between the populace and the state. The essay *Tlatelolco: reflexiones de un testigo* is written by Gilberto Balam, one of the students who took part in the events of 1968 and, apparently, was present in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas on 2 October. At the time of the massacre, Balam was a student residing at la Casa del Estudiante Guerrerense (a dorm paid for by the Guerrero government to accommodate children of Guerrero peasants who came to Mexico City to continue their secondary education); he came to Mexico City from Huajiltepec to study and, hopefully, to secure a better future than that awaiting him in the rural Guerrero. He wrote the essay in May 1969, while in the Lecumberri prison, where many participants in the Tlatelolco demonstration were held.

The essay *Tlatelolco: historia de una infamia* was written in 1969 by Roberto Blanco Moheno, historian, journalist and writer, who at the time of the massacre was 48 years old. He wrote for several periodicals, including *¡Siempre!*, where he published a number of critical essays on the events of 1968. Blanco Moheno also expressed his staunch support for Díaz Ordaz's government both in this essay and in earlier writings. So, at the first glance, the two authors are coming from diametrically opposing backgrounds and should, for all intents and purposes, represent the two opposing discourses – the state or media discourse and *vox populi*.

But there appear to be more similarities than differences between the two texts. The style is the most powerful example of these similarities. Both texts analyse the events preceding the massacre, using high academic language; both texts switch to more emotional and personal tones when they want the reader to sympathize with the narrator. (1) And both texts start with a personal story, so that the reader could establish an emotional link with the author. In Balam's essay, the opening sentence reads:

> Cuando nos trajeron la noticia de la muerte de mi padre, sentí una álgida desnudez en lo más profundo de mi adolescente interioridad, un arrancamiento súbito y brutal de la fuerza que alimentaba mi nexo con la realidad; me sentí de repente suspendido en el aire en un vértigo de soledad.

(id., 11)

From the start of the essay, the affective domain of the collective conscience is fully engaged in the narrative. The reader is supposed to feel empathy for a young boy who has just lost his father and has to leave his family to study in the city; anger when the school is shut down and the students have to fend for themselves; grief for the boy's grandmother – all these emotions are similar to those colouring the poetic discourse. But then the style changes to the 'academic analysis' – in the remaining sections, there is nothing personal about the author; he seems to have 'left' the text and is examining the events from outside. This is comparable to the second chapter of Blanco Moheno's text, where the analysis is not enveloped in emotions and personal connections. Similarly, Blanco Moheno's essay opens with a deeply emotional personal statement, in which he first establishes a link between the cognitive and affective domains ('un ansia dolorosa de verdad' (Blanco Moheno 1969: 5)) and imposes martyrdom upon himself: telling the truth is linked with physical and emotional suffering ('hasta llegar, con mi dolor, al fondo de las cosas', 'intento desesperado de romper mitos' (ibid.)).

The first section of Blanco Moheno's essay ('Zarzuela') also begins with a personal story - about his visit to Spain,- suggesting that the rest of the text is also relevant to him personally. The discussion of the author's trip tells us of 'un cochecito' rented by him; of how he does not understand art; of the joy of seeing 'chiquillos' playing in the streets of a poor village in Andalucia – all this is supposed to show the reader that the author is 'just like them', and to build a link between his experiences and those of his country. On the one hand, this 'personalises' him; on the other, it suggests that his experiences are transferrable and common to others. Balam's story of life in poverty and the anguish of coming to Mexico City also aims to make him 'like everyone else' and make his experiences similar to those of his fellow students.

(2) The 'truth', apparently told in the essays, is of a unique quality. Neither essay actually delivers a narrative of the event of 2 October. The title of Balam's essay suggests that the essay is about '2 de octubre' but there are only 3 pages (96-98) out of 110 that deal with the massacre that he 'witnessed'. There are some interesting points about the way Balam describes the events of October 2. First, the time of the event is given as 'cerca de las 18.30 horas' (Balam 1969: 97), and there is no mention of the infamous

green fireworks shot at 18:10. Instead, the fireworks appear to have been shot from the helicopter: 'escasos segundos después un helicóptero lanzó luces de bengala dando señales' (ibid.). This goes against the shared version of the 18:10 start with the two green fireworks launched from somewhere in the square (Blanco Moheno, for one, suggests that the students shot the fireworks; the majority of other sources state that the Olympia Battalion members were responsible for the fireworks launch). There is also little narrative about the events in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Blanco Moheno's work. Instead, the essay aims to analyse the reasons for the massacre and determine who was responsible for it. As I noted in another analysis, deviations in the accounts of the order and minutiae of the events appear in the state and popular discourses; this, I suggest, indicates that the accuracy of representation is not the goal of either discourse.

When discussing the way the massacre was reported by the officials, Balam states that 'No cabe discusión. El pueblo sabe la verdad de los acontecimientos' (id., 99); but where would the people learn the truth from? If it is from the newspapers, then everyone would be getting the same information; but then it would not be the truth because it has been agreed that Mexican press is 'vendida'. If the truth is coming from eyewitnesses, then the narrative would be individual and not necessarily shared by the populace. So, the truth refers to the narrative kept in the collective conscience. Balam assumes that this narrative is both homogenous and accurate. Seeing that he acknowledges that the state has lied about the massacre, the narrative is that of *vox populi*. The categorical tone of this is similar to that used by Blanco Moheno when impressing upon the readers that his narrative is the only truthful one. Would the two authors use the same technique to deliver the same message? Balam is defending himself and his friends, while Blanco Moheno is accusing (students, Cubans, Russians, Spanish immigrants to Mexico, José Revueltas, and many others), so it would seem that the two narratives do not share the same aim and therefore would use different methods of getting their point across.

In Blanco Moheno's essay, the 'truth' is delivered by one person only – the author. The categorical tone of this work is particularly strong when the author states his infallibility. Everything he says has to be true – 'y siempre les [a los estudiantes] he dicho la verdad, al menos mi verdad' (Blanco Moheno 1969: 260); he is certain that the majority of Mexican population agrees with him, as he describes the number of letters he

received ‘para insultarme o felicitarme – en proporción de 30 a 70 respectivamente’ (ibid.). Knowledge control and monopoly on information characterise this text as hegemonic: ‘Anuncié, tres años antes de que los hechos ocurrieran, que existía un plan para hundir a México en el caos poco antes de la celebración de la Olimpiada. Lo sabía a ciencia cierta. Previne al país denunciando el plan, pero no di nombres’ (id., 260). The author is in charge of the information that will save the country, and the country is at his mercy.

Blanco Moheno is certain that some of the Spanish exiles in Mexico were responsable for the unrests preceding the massacre. A lengthy discussion of the nature of the Second Republic, the King’s problems, Primo de Rivera’s character, suggests that Blanco Moheno is establishing himself as an authority on history. By doing so, he sets himself up as an a priori truth-teller, analyst and deliverer of an objective message – this will be needed when he talks about Tlatelolco and expects his readers to believe him, the way they are being conditioned to believe him in the Spanish section. This style of self-established authority first appears in the blurb and later loses its emotional overtones and becomes more of an analytical discourse.

Blanco Moheno sees himself as the sole defender of Mexican president and Mexico as a whole against the evil forces of the unnamed foreign countries led by the U.S. ‘Puesto que el Presidente de la República no puede estar hablando todos los días, ni debe hacerlo, para dar gusto a cuatro docenas de adolescentes cuyos hilos de títeres algunos no pueden ver, o no quieren ver, espero de usted la amistosa confianza que me permita decir absolutamente la verdad’ (id., 261). His insistence that he tells the truth is combined with an emotional shielding of the president, derision against a handful of youths (who are puppets in the hands of evil), and the self-proclaimed position of the sole truth-bearer.

Balam’s challenge is less obvious but still visible, especially in the description of the shooting in the square: ‘Hubo carreras, gritos y auténticos alaridos que se mezclaron con el ruido de las armas cortas y largas que entraron en acción a manos del enemigo’ (Balam 1969: 97). The enemy is the armed soldiers firing on students and civilians. Balam’s martyrdom is shared with Mexican students: when talking about the Olympic Games being seen as a homage to Mexican youth, Balam remarks sarcastically that at the

time ‘la juventud de México yacía en las cárceles, en los hospitales, en los anfiteatros, en los panteones’ (id., 100). This way of representing the victims of the massacre is also used in the Tlatelolco poetry.

(3) The technique of actively involving the reader in the analysis is used in both essays. The affinity between the author and the reader is particularly evident in Blanco Moheno’s work, when the reader is directly addressed and praised for his patient attention: ‘el lector, ¡tan paciente!, haría ben si leyera con cuidado a siguiente documento’ (Blanco Moheno 1969: 104). Now the reader feels appreciated and, to a certain extent, in control of the text because the reader realizes that the author knows that it’s getting on a bit, especially since in the previous 100+ pages only a line or two actually refer to Tlatelolco. Then Blanco Moheno invites the reader to actively join the dialogue: ‘bello, ¿verdad?’ (id., 105). Having started as the only unshakeable authority on the subject, he is now inviting the reader to join him (still in a very constrained, structured way: the reader is all but given the answer to say), thus indicating that he is not the only one of this opinion – others think this way, too. And since everyone is entitled to their opinion (as Blanco Moheno has already said in no uncertain terms), this goes to show that the author’s opinion is shared by others and, consequently, that the opposing opinion is not. Blanco Moheno is constructing popular support for his analysis.

Once the full unity is achieved and popular support garnered, Blanco Moheno begins to speak on behalf of the populace (the readers). And the populace is constructing the text alongside Blanco Moheno: ‘El tercer es Fidel Castro, del que vamos a hablar largamente en cuanto revisemos los antecedentes de la muerte de Eduardo Chibás’ (Blanco Moheno 1969: 121) - not just delivering a narrative, but analysing it, just as Blanco Moheno was doing by himself before. The populace is now the owner of the knowledge Blanco Moheno was imparting onto his readers earlier in the essay.

Similarly, Balam presents the populace as the keeper of the ‘truth’ about the event: ‘el pueblo sabe la verdad de los acontecimientos’ (Balam 1969: 99), trusting the reader to preserve the knowledge and defend it against attacks in a ‘discusión’. He also invites the reader into the dialogue and by the end of the essay, the ‘nosotros’ construct (characteristic of the popular Tlatelolco discourse) shows that the reader is, at least,

accepted into sharing the students' agenda: '¡A ganarnos al proletariado!', 'por ahora impulsemos la unidad estudiantil' (id., 110). The pathos of the calls is self-evident.

Blanco Moheno's essay also ends on a highly emotional note: 'No sé: tal vez haya algo más que esta carne y esta sangre en que revuelvo mi dolor y busco, como un niño ciego encarcelado, la única luz posible, la de la libertad' (Blanco Moheno 1969: 284). The author is now 'naked' in front of the reader, asking for compassion ('un niño ciego encarcelado'), and renouncing his knowledge ('no sé), but restating his emotional attachment to the event ('dolor'). The reader therefore cannot leave the author's side because the author needs protection (as a child); the reader assumes the role of a parent and is now entrusted with knowledge and can use it to judge what happened. Blanco Moheno also uses images from the popular Tlatelolco discourse to strengthen his point – 'las manchas de sangre en las antiguas piedras de Tlatelolco' (id., 285) that cannot be washed off, appear in many poems dedicated to the massacre (Octavio Paz's 'Intermitencias del oeste 3' is one of the best known examples). By using both state and popular discourse to deliver his message, Blanco Moheno secures the support of both sides of the conflict. Balam does the same by assigning his text a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is presented as a defense speech in a trial of his fellow students imprisoned in Lecumberri. On the other hand, the essay was published (thus released to the public – three times between February and August 1969), so the populace takes on the role of the authority able to make informed decisions and pass judgment as if in the court of law.

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In conclusion, the two essays use a number of techniques to convince the reader that their text is telling the truth about the event. Blanco Moheno gives the reader a path to follow through the analysis of a number of historical events that, as he argues, led to the massacre. By establishing himself as the sole authority on the 'truth' about the massacre, Blanco Moheno *compels* the reader to believe him, share his views and emotions, and accept his authority. This is a posthegemonic stance –control is used to attain obedience. Balam narrates the events preceding the massacre and takes the reader along the narrative, pointing out the most shocking events (such as, for example, the death of a student from a wound to the throat), and ultimately forming the reader's opinion of the

reasons for the massacre. He first presents himself as an ignorant child accepting the authority of his elders and then as a member of the student movement challenging the authority of the state; by narrating – and not analysing - the events preceding the massacre, he lets the readers draw their own conclusions and *willingly* join the fight against the corrupt government. This is a hegemonic stance – consent is attained through understanding.

However, the hegemonic/posthegemonic division is not so clear cut. The hegemonic perspective dominates Blanco Moheno's initial analysis and most of Balam's essay. From this standpoint, the texts operate with facts and analyse the information that they present. The posthegemonic perspective is present at the start and end of Balam's work and that takes over Blanco Moheno's essay once the factual accuracy has been established and agreed upon. From this standpoint, both texts start with personal stories to link the authors to the analysed events; use shocking descriptions of physical suffering and therefore rouse emotional response from the reader; and create the image of martyrs to the cause. The affective nature of Blanco Moheno's analytical discourse becomes dominant because taking a cognitive approach prevents the analysis from forcing its point across and leaves it open to rational criticism (e.g. of unsubstantiated conclusions). Both essays link emotions with being right. There is an affective set used by both essays (and other Tlatelolco texts): shame, grief, and anger. These emotions are the strongest when the authors claim to tell the truth about the massacre.

The apparent initial standoff between hegemony (state discourse) and posthegemony (*vox populi*) is turned on its head: Balam's essay is predominantly hegemonic and Blanco Moheno's work is largely posthegemonic, and the two essays use the techniques from both spheres. The consequent affective/cognitive unity in the analyses of the event leads to the same result: the creation of the symbolic value of the massacre in the Tlatelolco essays. Both texts combine hegemonic and posthegemonic stances to produce not a cogent narrative of the event, but a symbol of the massacre: the martyrdom of the few inciting the ire of the many.

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